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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 001018

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DEPT FOR WHA/CCA

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TAGS: [CU](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: CUBAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS STAGE MASSIVE PROTESTS

Classified By: COM: Michael E. Parmly: For reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (C) SUMMARY: Several hundred students at the University de Oriente in Santiago de Cuba participated in a protest the past several weeks. Initially a small group of students had surrounded the car of the dean to express their outrage in the wake of the rape of a female student about the lack of security on campus. Sources tell us that spontaneously about 300 students joined the demonstration angered about the dilapidated student housing, the poor quality of the food and the lack of adequate lighting, as well as a controversial decision to segregate male and female students in separate dormitories this year. The students avoided having any identifiable leaders of the protest. We are told that the students focused on concrete problems on campus and consciously avoided adding political demands. The scale and the length of the protest appear to have taken the authorities by surprise. Although academics and students report that state security agents flooded the campus, to date there have been no known expulsions or reprisals for involvement in the demonstrations. Sources at the University report some improvement in conditions there. End Summary

12. (C) In separate discussions with POL officers, Father Jose Conrado, a parish priest in Santiago de Cuba and Roberto de Meranda, a former political prisoner and head of the independent College of teachers, gave accounts of a series of student protests that had broken out in September at the Universidad de Oriente in Santiago de Cuba in eastern Cuba. Students at the beginning of the year were upset by the decision to place male and female in separate dormitories. De Miranda explained that numerous long term co-habitation relationships had developed. Both De Miranda and Conrado reported that students had for years endured living in dilapidated dormitories with leaky roofs, and low quality, poorly prepared cafeteria food. Frequently there was no water for showers. The lighting was so inadequate that students could only study in their rooms by the light of a television set with the volume turned off. However, students for the first time in a long time expected that the University would make improvements this year.

13. (C) On 14 September a small student group upset about the

rape of a student the previous day surrounded the car of Dean Zaida Valdes Estrada, shouting demands. The female student allegedly was raped on the campus grounds by somebody who was not a part of the University community. The students felt that this case highlighted the lack of security on campus including the fact that there was no lighting on the outside of the dormitory buildings. Many students also expressed anger that foreign students at the University received better treatment than Cuban students. Press sources report that as many as 300 students joined the protests. The website CubaNet reported that the protest spread to the graduate school the Instituto Superior Julio Antonio Mella.

14. (C) Conrado told us that the protests lasted for several weeks in September and October. DeMiranda said that state security agents quickly flooded on to the campus at the first sign of student protest (i.e., following the incident of the Dean's car), but we have not received any reports that violence was used against the protesters. Conrado told us that the officials were frustrated by the fact that the students made sure that there were no identifiable leaders to the demonstrations. Students passed the organizations of each day's events to students in different faculties. The University closed the dining hall in hopes that students would return to their parents' homes, but the protests continued.

15. (U) Press reports indicate that initially the students expected possible expulsions after a general meeting at the University on 25 September, but to date there has been no known reprisals against student demonstrators. In fact, reportedly the lights outside the dormitories are turned on at night, and students told the website CubaEncuentro that the dining hall had reopened and the food was now "like that in hotels"

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14. (U) Comment: This protest is highly unusual in that it started spontaneously, involved large numbers of students and lasted a long time. Despite the fact that the protest built quickly, the students very effectively frustrated the authorities who in the past have quashed demonstrations rapidly by detaining the ringleaders. In this case, officials could not identify any specific leaders. Our sources also emphasized that the protests were not a response to a sudden deterioration in conditions; the students in fact had endured the same bad living conditions for years. It is also significant that the protesters consciously avoided politicizing their demands. They knew what they could get away with. That is not a sign of cowardice, but rather shows a calculated awakening of consciousness. This reflects the same wave of rising expectations seen in many parts of Cuban society since Raul Castro's speech of 26 July. Many Cubans want specific, concrete improvements in their living conditions now, and are increasingly vocal in expressing that demand.

PARMLY